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Where is CIA Taking U.S.?

In one of his increasingly frequent personnel shuffles since Watergate, President Nixon announced the shift of James Schlesinger from head of the CIA to secretary of Defense — and said Schlesinger's place at CIA would be taken by one William E. Colby.

Colby had been a deputy director of CIA and, in the atmosphere of Watergate, hardly anyone took note of what appeared to be a routine bureaucratic promotion. But the appointment, if routine, may determine the course of CIA for years to come.

Colby is, indeed, a thoroughgoing CIA bureaucrat. Totally innocuous in appearance, he had been described to me as "the last guy in the room you'd pick out to be a cloak-and-dagger operator." His academic credentials — Princeton and Columbia Law School — are impeccable.

Now 53 years old, Colby has been actively involved in intelligence since World War II. He has served the CIA in a variety of capacities, even as comptroller. He is articulate, efficient, courageous and dedicated. He is surely among those David Halberstam would call "the best and the brightest."

But like those others among "the best and the brightest," he seems to have a penchant for losing sight of long-term values and objectives in his zeal for doing his job. He is so loyal to the conventions of his work that he does not reflect on where it is taking the country.

That certainly was true in Vietnam, where Colby was ranking CIA representative and director of the Civil Operations and Rural Development

Support (CORDS) program, which had responsibility for Viet

namization of the countryside.

In this capacity, Colby created and supervised the South Vietnamese government's notorious Phoenix program which, in the guise of combatting Viet Cong infiltration, became Saigon's license for mass killing, extortion, torture and destruction of homes of civilians generally and of its political opponents particularly.

In her book, "Fire in the Lake," which won most of the literary prizes for non-fiction last year, Frances Fitzgerald wrote:

"The Phoenix program was in a sense a model for the entire Vietnamization program. The armed forces of the GVN (Saigon) everywhere contained underpaid and badly led soldiers who terrorized rather than pacified the civilian population. To augment this force meant to increase the number of bandits at large in the country — and bandits that were now supplied with modern American weapons.

"But there was another issue at stake. As American-made institutions, the armed forces of the Saigon government were structurally incapable of dealing with the political struggle. By fitting out more Vietnamese with rifles and uniforms, Nixon was merely forcing them into a conflict they could not possibly win even if there were no Viet Cong soldiers left in the South."

In hearings before a House subcommittee in 1971, Colby loyally defended the Phoenix program. But at no point was he able to refute the contention that it was, at best, an instrument for fighting terror with terror and, frequently, simply a device for covering murder and pillage.

When asked during the

hearings whether he thought Phoenix was the kind of program with which the United States should be associated, Colby answered:

"Yes, because it is an essential part of the war effort. I also believe there are a number of other things which are not ideal in Vietnam that do not work the way we would like them to. However, I think that by our association and by our working on it, we have substantially improved a great number of this kind of program."

What Colby was saying I have heard said by officials of AID's police assistance program — who justify American association with police assassination and torture in such places as Brazil and Guatemala. They were saying such association is okay, if we just frown now and then at the excesses.

But, as Miss Fitzgerald's comment suggests, sometimes this kind of tolerance is self-destructive — and practical men, not just fuzzy-headed idealists, can see that loathsome means usually lead not to admirable, but to loathsome ends.

The Senate is unlikely to reject Colby because of Phoenix — but this could be the occasion for a major inquiry into such CIA undertakings. In the long run, the "best and the brightest" thinking of the William Colbys may be America's downfall.